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Telling Stories – Farmers Offer New Insights into Farming Resilience

Histoires vécues – Les agriculteurs apportent de nouvelles perspectives sur la résilience de l'agriculture

Geschichten erzählen – Landwirtinnen und Landwirte bieten neue Einblicke in die Resilienz der Landwirtschaft

Phillipa Nicholas-Davies, Susan Fowler and Peter Midmore

Resilience, in a farming and food system, varies through time and space, and arises from multiple interactions operating at various scales. As the articles in this Special Issue demonstrate, it is not easy to pin down a precise, unambiguous description of resilience, and to construct a reliable and unambiguous measurement framework is even more difficult. In this article we take a different approach, starting from the basic elements of the system and learning from the experiences of farmers. Their descriptions of how they have managed critical challenges and decision points in their agricultural practice can rewardingly complement existing ideas about resilience and lead to more efficient policies targeting healthy ecosystems and future food security.

We have used a narrative approach (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000; Reissman, 2008), in which farmers are invited to tell the story of their farming life and their own experiences. Narratives are usually structured around cause and effect, so the quality and configuration of the different drivers and resilience responses can be observed. Two other important advantages come from using this approach. The stories farmers tell include their choice of the events and explanations that are important to them, and allows a glimpse into their mind-set. We can identify each individual decision point as it has been explained in the context of the whole story, rather than being viewed as an isolated

event. While farmers themselves do not use the formal framework of resilience analysis, as researchers we can link decision points to the elements that it comprises.

Listening to farmers' narratives

We used a narrative approach (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000), which gives the participant as much freedom as possible to tell their story in their own words, and to express what happened when, and why. We also wanted to avoid the trap of steering the participant's attention to what we wanted to know, and so focussed on what they wanted to relate. For this reason, when contacting farmers to join in this study, we

provided only a very broad outline of its purpose. Giving up control of the way in which such evidence is produced is the means to come close to understanding changes that narrators believe important, and what occurs subsequently. Interacting with a total stranger provided an unusual opportunity for participants to explore their memories. We found that as much as relating their story to another, this initiated a process of self-explanation.

To make the conversation as natural as possible, two of the authors visited most farms to hear the stories. After a simple factual question to put the narrator at ease, 'please describe your farm', the narrative was initiated by asking, 'please tell us the story of



A crop of rape in East Anglia.

your farming life'. After that, we listened actively, observing the speaker's behaviour and body language, and only became involved using expressions of interest and encouragement if the narrator faltered. After the conclusion of the story, and only if necessary, we asked some questions to clarify its internal structure. We also noted useful additional comments that emerged in informal conversation after the voice recorder had been switched off.

“ Les facteurs internes semblent être beaucoup plus susceptibles de provoquer des changements que les influences externes telles que la réglementation, les fluctuations et opportunités du marché, les conditions météorologiques ou les problèmes de maladie. ”

The process of analysis started immediately after leaving the farm, with a discussion between us to identify the major issues and ideas that had emerged, while they were fresh in our minds. We listened again to the whole recording soon after, to arrange the story events into a timeline (the story was not always told in historical sequence). The recordings were transcribed, and once all the narratives were gathered, we identified common themes and patterns of events. We were specifically interested in finding points in the story where farm system changes, or uncertainty and risk, produced responses. These critical decision points provided the material to work with. Through the ways in which they were described and how they fitted into the overall story, they

helped improve understanding of what types of stress and shocks produced robust, adaptive or resilient responses, and provided insight into farmers' mind-sets. From follow-up enquiries, however, we know that not all the stresses and shocks experienced appeared in the initial narratives.

Such stories are not reconstructions of social, environmental and business events. They are subject to the limitations of memory; the moment of telling is more influenced by current and recent experiences and concerns and the desire of the teller to present themselves and their actions in a specific light. These, though, are not limitations but important pieces of evidence in themselves about the way in which farmers perceive how they respond to challenges.

Analysing East Anglian arable farmers' stories

The exploration of farmers' management of critical decision points is based on narratives collected in East Anglia in the first half of 2018. To reflect different attitudes to risk and degrees of experience, we selected equal numbers of narrators at the beginning, middle and late career stages. Nine farmers provided their farm and life stories in visits that took between one and two hours. Nine narratives was the maximum number that resources allowed. Qualitative studies usually involve relatively small numbers of participants because the objective is richness of detail rather than representativeness. For validation, after analysis, the extended summaries of the stories were provided to the narrators, including verbatim excerpts from the transcripts that we identified as significant, to give them the opportunity to correct and qualify the interpretation.

From the set of nine narratives, a total of 32 critical change points in the farming histories were identified – 12 of these arose from sudden, unexpected shocks; the remaining 20 came either from cyclical processes or trends (Maxwell, 1986) that farmers are more aware of and can choose how and when to respond to. Seven critical

change points produced responses characterised as robust, 24 produced responses of adaptation, and four of transformation (multiple classifications were used in some instances where the response did not fall exclusively into a single category (Meuwissen *et al.*, 2019). The most prevalent shock mentioned was the sudden death of a family member or key worker, followed by human health issues. Other critical decision points principally related to handovers from one farming generation to the next (a cyclical driver of change), followed by the need to cover two family livelihoods from one income and falling profitability (trends which have driven change). Generally, internal drivers seem to be much more likely to provoke change than external influences such as regulation, market fluctuations and opportunities, weather or disease problems. Transformations, while clearly involving a change in the business structure, were neither remarkably radical nor unprecedented.

While it is interesting to explore different drivers that prompt various resilience responses, the most important insights come from the structure of the narratives themselves. One prominent finding is that much change to farm systems happens gradually. Incremental responses arise from what are mostly considered by narrators to be 'normal' variations. Individually, none amount to a response to a critical decision point, yet over time they result in a substantial change. One farmer said of the continual stream of small pressures acting on his business 'the only way I can really describe it is the boiled frog syndrome [...] but it's 5p on the price of a litre of red diesel, or not being able to use glyphosate in various situations, or black grass herbicides not working properly, or whatever, [...] they've all had an implication to my business'.

This prevalent finding has two implications:

- First, resilience attributes are not clear-cut, and there is a spectrum of successively stronger responses to drivers of change from robustness to transformation.

- Second, frequent small-scale changes, more significant than robustness but not enough to characterise as adaptation of the farm system, cumulate eventually in a much broader overall change. This is an unexplored part of the resilience spectrum, which we describe as 'creeping change'. In these stories (and probably more generally) it makes a significant contribution to the resilience of farm systems.

The more significant responses discussed in East Anglian arable farm stories can be divided into two main strategic attitudes. These either involve:

- Expansion of the area managed (although not necessarily owned or rented); or
- Efforts to streamline activity and release resources for other types of activity, agricultural or otherwise.

One early-career narrator had doubled the area farmed over eight years 'which has given me more than enough to do'; correspondingly, a late-career farmer observed that 'all the one, two hundred acre ones have gone [...] it's just, economy [of] scale I think isn't it. You either jump on that hamster wheel or you don't'. These strategies were expressed in different ways, depending on the degree to which there was an emotional relationship with specific pieces of land and family heritage. Some narrators (four out of the nine) characterised themselves more as business people, combining farming with other commercial interests, which perhaps indicated a gradual reduction in attachment and emotional involvement with agriculture. In one mid-career life-story, 'agriculture has slowly moved from being our core business to being an ancillary business, it still takes up an awful lot of my time, it still takes up a fair amount of working capital in terms of variable costs [...] what it contributes to the bottom line has gone from being 80 per cent of my income to being about 30 per cent'. To a degree, outside engagement provides compensation for the experiences of hard work and loneliness that often appear



East Anglian field prepared for potato planting.

in the narratives, as well as much needed income.

A degree of being content or discontent that emerged from the stories stemmed largely from the quality of support from the previous generation. In some, the provision of practical advice and emotional support was highly valued; in others there was an unspoken or even blatant expectation that potential successors should work for little money. Intergenerational succession was the most frequently mentioned driver of change, because the farm resource is restricted: 'obviously the challenge of trying to support two families essentially from it can become a bit more of an issue'. Not every story featured a successor, although all had taken over from earlier generations. One late-career

narrator in his late 60s felt that he had 'another ten years in front of me and, [...] it depends whether the boys want [it], they won't farm it I don't think'. His 92-year-old father still signs the cheques. Some narratives featured useful parental support, financial and technical, whereas others had evidence of family conflict that hindered improvements or even yielded harmful change. Further family pressures have arisen from changing perceptions of gender roles and work-life balance: 'well, I don't really remember dad being hands on in our upbringing so much, whereas now it's [...] expected and actually I enjoy it, but we're trying to balance that with the [...] career of farming, where windows and opportunities of actually doing what you need to do are becoming smaller and smaller'.

An important feature of the stories was what narrators chose, whether consciously or not, to leave out. There were several instances where, either from intervention by another family member or after the visit, we discovered significant events that altered the overall interpretation of the story. However, what was noticeable across all career stages was that some issues did not appear. Importantly, climate change was barely mentioned, and adverse weather events were accepted as routine. While frustration with the perceived inadequacies of policies was evident, the topic was discussed with resignation rather than engagement, as one early-career narrator described: ‘there’s no other industries that are subsidised, subsidise the bottom 20% and if you can’t compete, post subsidies, then it’ll be a bitter pill for people to swallow but that’s the way of the world isn’t it really?’

“Interne Gründe scheinen viel eher zu Veränderungen zu führen als externe Einflüsse wie Regulierungen, Marktschwankungen und -chancen, Wetter- oder Krankheitsprobleme.”

Learning from a wider context

Narrative analysis was also conducted in the same way in four other farming system contexts: dairy farming in Flanders; hazelnut production in central Italy; intensive poultry (broiler and egg) production in southern Sweden; and corporate-scale arable farming in northeast Bulgaria (see Coopmans *et al.*, 2019). There were important similarities in these differing system contexts, but also divergences in the overall character of the life-stories. In Bulgaria, for example, concern about intergenera-



Planting a potato crop in East Anglian field.

tional handovers was less apparent. Although the farms are also primarily family businesses, because of the large scale, management roles are shared between different family members. This contrasts with the systems where single operators are common (e.g. dairying in Flanders) which resulted in more complex succession issues. In central Italy, the profitability of hazelnut production enabled land to be added to holdings easily, albeit outside traditional areas of cultivation. In contrast, Flemish dairy farms, under pressure from both competition for land for urban development and a cost-price squeeze, experienced major difficulties in enlarging their land area. In all systems, though, internal challenges to resilience were dominant and they also revealed extensive incremental

changes rather than major shifts in farm system structure.

The benefits – and shortcomings – of analysing farmer life stories

Drawing out largely unprompted farming life histories and analysing their content is valuable because it can challenge preconceived ideas about agricultural businesses and what is important to them. One of the most obvious outcomes of this study is that, from the narrators’ viewpoints, weather, pest and disease problems, market volatility and income support and environmental policy pose less risk and uncertainty challenges to farm business resilience than internal shocks, such as farmer health, or cycles such as retirement and succession. Overall, there was little

interest in insurable risk. Another insight is that frequent incremental adjustments, barely noticeable in the short term, add up over time to significant adaptation. These may be equally, if not more, effective in producing resilience than more wide-reaching and abrupt adaptations or transformations.

Comparing the East Anglian narratives across career stages and in different farming system contexts, a shift in self-identity can be seen. This suggests movement from a vocational to a more business-oriented approach to the management of farm resources and, although there are links to a farm-family history, the close knowledge of particular blocks of land is being loosened by various forms of technological innovation, particularly precision agriculture and the smart management approaches this enables. The trend is more advanced in arable farming than livestock husbandry, and is already having consequences for rural communities, land and the environment in terms of lower labour requirements impacting rural communities and reduced biodiversity due to more industrial scale operations. This shift in identity may eventually provide scope for a more entrepreneurial, adaptive and innovative industry, but also brings risks of de-stabilising production levels when crops are unprofitable.

The shape of farm transfer is changing across the generations, as farmers live and work longer, successors start

later, and family gender roles and focus on work-life balance are gradually revised. These have impacts on management styles, the attractiveness of farming as an occupation, and internal pressures, such as the need to provide incomes for two family generations, which all affect resilience. There is evidence (see, for example, Zagata and Sutherland, 2015) that policies for installing young farmers and pensioning off others late on in their careers has only very weak impact on facilitating intergenerational transfer. Other factors, mostly taxation and welfare, work in the opposite direction.

“ Internal drivers seem to be much more likely to provoke change than external influences such as regulation, market fluctuations and opportunities, weather or disease problems. ”

A fresh look at how change is occurring across time provides multiple benefits. Whilst recognising the rather limited scale of this study, it reveals a valid alternative approach that is highly granular, and uncovers

potentially important perspectives of relevance to policy development and provision of extension advice. Farmers' stories provide insights that diverge markedly from many applied quantitative models of risk and resilience, particularly with respect to the implications of a continuum of response to challenges rather than discrete categories. There is, however, a considerable gap that requires sensitive additional investigation that only emerged in these stories when they involved third parties to illustrate a point or to identify a role in the narrative. All the farmers who participated in these narratives were, at least *de facto*, resilient, since they operated reasonably well-functioning businesses. It was thus not possible to directly explore the mechanisms and responses of those that were too fragile and inflexible to cope with adverse trends and shocks, and had ceased farming.

A final thought concerns the consequences of the narrative approach. In several instances we were aware that the act of recounting the story of their farming lives, uninterrupted, had quite a cathartic effect and led to reappraisal which may itself have affected, positively or negatively, the resilience of the businesses that the narrators operated. This is not a limiting feature of such investigation, more an explicit reflection that any social science research does not take place in a vacuum, but is inextricably linked to the subject matter of its inquiry.

Further Reading

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Summary


Telling Stories – Farmers Offer New Insights into Farming Resilience

 We explore elements of resilience on East Anglian farms through analysis of nine farmers' life stories. Using a largely unprompted narrative approach, narrators had freedom to structure their own personal accounts, and later to review our initial interpretations. Transcriptions were organised in timelines, themes were identified, and causes and effects of major farm turning points distinguished. We find that internal drivers such as intergenerational transition, health and family relationships, from the narrators' viewpoint, were cited as producing more change than external pressures such as price volatility or production variation. Robust and especially adaptation responses are prevalent in the stories, transformations are neither particularly radical nor innovative, but widespread piecemeal change through time can accumulate to enhance resilience. Four farmers identified more as businesspeople, with blurred boundaries between their farming and other commercial interests. Farming succession, with occasional conflict and new problems arising from extended working lives, prompts most change. Insights can arise as much from what is unsaid in these stories, and self-explanation to outsiders can have cathartic effects. This narrative and analysis approach challenges preconceptions and can reframe theoretical perspectives and suggest approaches for policy reform. The focus was on existing farms with some resilience, further work should explore why former farmers were not resilient. Narrative analysis in other European countries showed important similarities in differing system contexts, but also divergences in the overall character of the life-stories.

Histoires vécues – Les agriculteurs apportent de nouvelles perspectives sur la résilience de l'agriculture

 Nous explorons les composantes de la résilience dans les exploitations agricoles d'Angleterre de l'est en analysant les parcours de neuf agriculteurs. En utilisant une approche narrative assez libre, les narrateurs avaient la liberté de structurer leurs propres récits personnels, et plus tard de revoir nos interprétations initiales. Les transcriptions ont été organisées selon des échéanciers, des thèmes ont été identifiés et les causes et les effets des principaux tournants charnières pour l'exploitation ont été distingués. Nous constatons que, du point de vue des narrateurs, les facteurs internes tels que la transition intergénérationnelle, la santé et les relations familiales ont été cités comme provoquant davantage de changement que les pressions externes telles que la volatilité des prix ou les variations de la production. Les réponses en matière de robustesse et surtout d'adaptation sont répandues dans les récits. Les transformations ne sont ni particulièrement radicales ni innovantes, mais des changements fragmentaires généralisés au fil du temps peuvent s'accumuler pour améliorer la résilience. Quatre agriculteurs se sont davantage identifiés comme des hommes d'affaires, avec des frontières floues entre leur activité agricole et d'autres intérêts commerciaux. La succession agricole, avec des conflits occasionnels et de nouveaux problèmes résultant du prolongement de la vie professionnelle, explique la plupart des changements. Les enseignements peuvent provenir autant de ce qui n'est pas dit dans ces récits, et l'auto-explication aux étrangers peut avoir des effets cathartiques. Cette approche narrative et analytique remet en question les idées préconçues et peut recadrer les perspectives théoriques et suggérer des approches de réforme des politiques. L'accent était mis sur les exploitations existantes ayant une certaine résilience, des travaux supplémentaires devraient explorer pourquoi ceux qui ont quitté le secteur n'étaient pas résilients. L'analyse narrative dans d'autres pays européens a montré des similitudes importantes dans les différents contextes du système, mais aussi des divergences dans le caractère global des parcours.

Geschichten erzählen – Landwirtinnen und Landwirte bieten neue Einblicke in die Resilienz der Landwirtschaft

 Mittels einer Analyse von Lebensgeschichten von neun Landwirtinnen und Landwirten untersuchen wir Aspekte der Resilienz auf landwirtschaftlichen Betrieben in Ostanglien. Unter Verwendung eines weitgehend spontanen erzählerischen Ansatzes erhielten die Befragten die Möglichkeit, ihre persönlichen Berichte frei zu strukturieren und zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt unsere ersten Interpretationen zu überprüfen. Die Transkriptionen wurden in Zeitlinien geordnet und bestimmte Themen wurden identifiziert. Darüber hinaus wurden die Ursachen für und die Auswirkungen von wichtigen Wendepunkten in der Betriebsführung herausgearbeitet. Wir stellen fest, dass interne Gründe wie Generationenwechsel, Gesundheit und Familienbeziehungen aus Sicht Befragten als Faktoren genannt wurden, die mehr Veränderungen bewirken als externe Einflüsse wie Preis- oder Produktionsschwankungen. In den Geschichten herrschen starke und vor allem Anpassungsreaktionen vor. Die berichteten Veränderungen sind weder besonders radikal noch innovativ, aber im Laufe der Zeit können sich zahlreiche punktuelle Veränderungen vollziehen, welche die Resilienz des Betriebs erhöhen. Vier Befragte wurden eher als Geschäftsleute identifiziert, wobei die Grenzen zwischen ihren landwirtschaftlichen und ihren anderen wirtschaftlichen Interessen verschwimmen. Die Betriebsnachfolge, die gelegentlich mit Konflikten und neuen Problemen verbunden sein kann, welche sich aus einem verlängerten Arbeitsleben ergeben, führt zu den häufigsten Veränderungen. Aus dem, was in diesen Geschichten ungesagt bleibt, können Erkenntnisse entstehen, und Außenstehenden über sich selbst Auskunft zu erteilen kann befreiend wirken. Der eingesetzte narrative und analytische Ansatz stellt Vorurteile in Frage und ermöglicht es, theoretische Perspektiven neu zu formulieren und Ansätze für politische Reformen vorzuschlagen. Der Schwerpunkt unserer Untersuchung lag auf bestehenden landwirtschaftlichen Betrieben mit einem gewissen Grad an Resilienz. Weiterführende Arbeiten sollten untersuchen, aus welchen Gründen ehemalige Landwirtinnen und Landwirte nicht resilient waren. Die narrative Analyse in anderen europäischen Ländern hat wichtige Ähnlichkeiten in unterschiedlichen Systemkontexten aufgezeigt, aber auch Unterschiede im Gesamtcharakter der Lebensgeschichten.